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# VOLUNTARY READING IN THE CLASSICAL HIGH SCHOOL

FROM THE PUPIL'S POINT OF VIEW<sup>1</sup>

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I trust that at the outset I am not ambiguous. I am not myself a pupil. Indeed, I regret keenly that, for the benefit of English teachers, I cannot speak from a schoolroom desk, and tell them, as a boy as well as a critic, what I think of them, of the English they give me to study, and the way they make me study it. After all, what a misfortune it is that these pupils of ours cannot hold pedagogical discussions of their own, and then report to us what they want, what they need, what in their hearts they feel! Such a privilege school-teachers never enjoy. More than lawyers, or doctors, or business men, they are handicapped by the immaturity of those with whom they work. Boys and girls cannot reason about educational systems. What concerns them is not the *why*, but the *how*; and the teacher's vital critic always remains the school committee.

Therefore I regret all the more that I am not a boy of fifteen. But I have graduated and am one of the clan; so that I can only ask the reader to forget himself, and as far as possible think of this subject as boys and girls might think, and look at it for the moment from their point of view.

Voluntary reading, as far as I have observed, today is not related to the study of English in classical high schools. Conditions are such that a relation between the two is next to impossible. What these conditions are I wish, first of all, to explain. In the second place, I wish to describe briefly a few methods of teaching college English which I have used in my efforts to meet these existing conditions, and which have, in a small way, brought about that correlation of home and school work of which we are speaking.

In the first place, there is no time. We are driven, crowded,

<sup>1</sup> Read at the meeting of the Association of New England Teachers of English, November, 1904.

hounded, as it is, by our prescribed work, to say nothing of going into other fields to gather grain of a different kind. We cannot afford to. The elective system and the increasingly greater demands of the colleges have perhaps enriched our programs, but they have also brought us to a state of utter poverty in our teaching of English. Every minute must be counted and used. Every hour must be strenuous. In the Newton High School exigencies of time and space have made it absolutely impossible for "classical" pupils to have more than two periods of English a week in all except the first, or freshman, year. These two forty-five-minute periods must serve for literature, composition work, and rhetoric. Newton, moreover, is no worse off than most cities in the East. In the classical high schools of New England the average number of recitations in English is less than three. Under such circumstances is it any wonder that teachers are willing to rest content if they do the prescribed work satisfactorily and nothing more?

But not merely do the college examinations take all the time. They themselves are narrow, exacting, petty. The questions set on papers by some of the smaller institutions are often rigid and technical to the extreme. Harvard now seems to be taking a step forward in this respect, and is giving the boy who has read and thought for himself a chance to reveal what he knows. Nevertheless, by the very nature of the tests which they give, many colleges are today discouraging, if not forbidding, that correlation which our subject suggests.

Lack of time and cast-iron examinations are serious obstacles in our way. There is another, even more fatal. Between those two parts of the boy's work which we wish to fasten together there is a wide gap, a natural chasm, so actual and so vast that I have never yet seen a real boy in a secondary school able to cross it. Not only does the teacher see this gap; from the point of view of the scholar it exists as well. I have found it in every boy's mind which I ever explored. Among pupils out of school and in classes it is constantly apparent. The average youth of fifteen or sixteen does not think of his voluntary reading and his study of literature as one and the same thing. They are as different to him as are Latin and geometry, or even more so.

I prepared for Harvard, with twenty-five others, in one of the so-called Latin schools of New England, corresponding almost exactly to the average classical high school of today. This, fortunately was not so long ago that I have forgotten in the least how we boys felt toward the same prescribed English, with a few exceptions, that I am now teaching. Our English periods we all enjoyed. We liked the teacher. He made the hours interesting by his personality, so that they passed only too quickly. But for the "classics then on the college list" we had no natural, inborn enthusiasm. If we had shown such a feeling, I am confident that the master would have considered us abnormal and been worried. As a matter of fact, we had the same feelings for them that we had for Ovid or Xenophon, rules of French grammar, or quadratic equations. They were all our stint of work at that period of our lives, our portion of labor to do in order to get into college, whither we all were going. I do not believe that it occurred to one of us then, any more than I see it occurring to girls and boys now, that the *Essay on Burns*, the *De Coverley Papers*, and *Macbeth* were of the same stuff that made the books which we read at our homes when our lessons were done.

When the school which I attended, on some occasion or other, presented me with a copy of *Under Drake's Flag*, by G. A. Henty, an impression was made on my mind which I distinctly remember, and the result of which I still feel. At the time I was puzzled. For Henty to come to me through school seemed somehow incongruous. I did not know then what it meant. But now, looking back, I can see that really the first span of a bridge was being laid across that dismal gulf between my study of literature and my voluntary reading.

Not a month ago I saw a boy of fourteen pass through a similar experience. I had just taken from a class *The Lady of the Lake* and put into their hands Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. At the close of the hour an astonished, excited voice said to me: "I—I've read this book!" "Well, and what of that?" "Why, I didn't know we studied *this kind of a book* in school."

Such a dawning of light as this comes to comparatively few boys and girls. To the majority the idea that a book is a book, whether it be Alger or Addison, is utterly foreign; and the conception that literature is merely the best that has been written, the less good being what they voluntarily read for pleasure—that the two are really rounds

in the same ladder—such a conception is unknown until possibly the last year in school. When such is the case, with even unlimited time, what appreciable relation of the two can we teachers be expected to bring about?

Now, the only way to relate voluntary reading to English in classical high schools is to bridge this wretched chasm from the start, and to do this we must understand what are the causes of its existence. They are three in number: the nature of the voluntary reading, the nature of the English in the classical high schools, and the nature of English teachers. The boys, I am confident, are in no way responsible.

Of what, then, does this voluntary reading consist? From the honest confession of a large number of pupils I find that 91 per cent. of it is light modern fiction; 5 per cent. essays, biography, and science; a little more than 1 per cent. poetry; and a little less than 2 per cent. what we should call literature. These figures would unquestionably change with locality and environment. Yet the change would be slight; and I have often been surprised to see how closely they agree with similar statements made by many teachers from all parts of the country. The authors of this great 91 per cent. range from Marryat, Henty, Miss Jewett, Dumas, Mr. Trowbridge, through all the authors of our "novels of the day," to Alger, Standish, Winfield, Castleman, and men who have produced a dozen books poorer and weaker than the proverbial "dime novel" of the news-stand. Never, however, have I found a boy reading a book positively vicious, or in my mind wholly worthless. Eighty-five per cent. of this fiction is good, healthy stuff—not harmful, not degenerating, not wicked, and certainly not literature. To meet the problem before us we must recognize this fact. We must realize that the vast majority of our pupils' voluntary reading is simple, crude narrative, entirely lacking in literary style or spirit or purpose.

And, now, what of the classical high-school English—these prescribed college books, to which we are going to relate this mass of fiction? I am neither "an educational anarchist" nor am I "throwing stones," but merely expressing the feeling of many an English teacher today, when I say that, taking them as a whole, I am heartily opposed to them, and with their character entirely out of sympathy.

Moreover, if I were a pupil, and a teacher should ask me why I felt so bitter, I should answer somewhat like this:

"Your object, you say, is to interest me in literature and in better reading. Yet your method has been to give me, with the exception of *Ivanhoe*, *Silas Marner*, and a play or two of Shakespeare's, some of the most difficult works of that literature—in no way suited, as far as I can discover, to the tastes of boys and girls. You have given me rather books which are the very opposite of my tastes and natural cravings—essays, speeches, idyllic poetry, biography, when I want a plot, and characters, and action, and something being said.

"You not only give me such books as these, but you give them to me to study, delve and dig in, to treat as I never treated any books before, and never shall again.

"Then, if I ask you, you say that the authors which you put before me wrote for mature minds, for people who already knew what literature was and enjoyed it, not for beginners such as I. You tell me that Macaulay wrote his *Essay on Addison* for the readers of the *Edinburgh Review*, a magazine which boys like me in 1843 no more thought of reading than you yourselves expect me to read the *Forum* or the *Atlantic Monthly*. You tell me that Burke made his speech on 'Conciliation with America' before a house of lords, middle-aged, gouty men in wigs and powder, half of whom fell asleep while he was speaking; and that only of late years has it been discovered to be a suitable introduction for boys of sixteen into the golden realms of English literature.

"You tell me many other facts that puzzle me. For instance, you say that these gentlemen wrote their fine books not only for grown-up people, but for pleasure, not to be studied, picked to bits, and used as examination material! Furthermore, you confess that my older brothers who have gone before me, did not always get that love of 'better reading' which you expected, and go on reading Macaulay and Addison when they left you, but have returned, in the rush and stress of their business lives, just where I am now—to these books I like today, to good stories, with hero and heroine and villain, and plenty of talk and action.

"And now you are wondering how you can relate your classics to my own reading. You cannot do it! At least, not until you give me such classics, and teach them to me in such a way, that they will appeal to me, not as something to be connected to my voluntary reading, but as one and the same thing with it."

Such is the natural, unspoken feeling in the heart of every real boy—the unwritten protest, because he is not a critic, against these “prescribed books” which we give him. They were not meant for him to read, still less to study. They are above his reach, beyond his interests. To be sure, with our help, he can master enough facts about them to pass an examination; but their style, their spirit, all that makes them literature, he was not destined at his age to understand or appreciate. The only three pupils, in my experience, who, of their own accord and because they liked it, made a constant diet of literature, were the most unattractive, unnatural, namby-pamby girls I ever knew.

A boy is never so. He is too genuine, too sincere, too near to nature’s heart. We may treat him as a man. We may put him through a course of training and drilling unsuited to any creature, young or old, that ever existed on God’s earth. He will respond to it and react; for he is sensitive, versatile, and alert. But we shall not accomplish our purpose. We shall not *change* him. To himself, to boyhood as he represents it, he is eternally true. As Mr. Flexner has well said:

The boy on whom our system of mental therapeutics will produce the calculated effect does not exist outside of a schoolmaster’s fancy. The real boy, obscure and complicated, may detach himself for preparatory purposes (I might say, for English purposes), but the center of his being is elsewhere—untouched, untamed.

To many teachers of English, especially to the older and more conservative, these sentences will sound harsh and perhaps unreasonable. To them the “college classics” are in a way sacred, and anything so radical as I suggest must seem to them naturally sacrilegious. Indeed, I expect (and want) little sympathy from that good gentleman, or any of his kind, who told a boy of seventeen that he could not “possibly consider him an educated fellow because he had not studied Macaulay’s Essays.”

Some will remind me, furthermore, that it is ever unwise to throw big stones, forgetting that the proverb works both ways, and that only those who live in glass houses really fear the hurling of missiles from without.

There are others who will declare it rash to criticise so severely a list of books prepared and authorized by “a body of learned pro-

fessors and long-experienced teachers." I would answer, in the first place, that it was just such "rash criticism" that killed, after a struggle, Defoe's *Plague in London* and DeQuincey's *Flight of the Tartar Tribe*—lights which once adorned this same "college list," books which today hardly an English teacher does not shudder to think of having had to teach. There may be other "plagues" among us. Who knows?

Again, I am not at all certain that the best men to prepare a list of books to study in secondary schools are "a body of learned professors and long-experienced teachers." The fact that the list is the result of scholarly idealism warrants it a practical failure with boys in their teens. For it is a far cry from a university scholar to the heart of a youth; and long experience is a capital school in which to forget the point of view of the boy.

And lastly, these same learned professors, whom we are told we must criticise so gently, I find are far from unanimous in their approval of this "prescribed English." If I had their permission, I might mention the names of three instructors, two in Harvard, who within a year have expressed feelings not a whit less strong than those I am now expressing. Not a month ago one of the faculty of a New England college said at a conference: "If you teachers in the schools didn't get these fellows so down on literature before they get to us, we might do a little something with them." When we explained to him the nature of the books we were obliged to teach, he readily agreed that "no boy could go through such a mill and come out eager for any more of it."

As a matter of fact, the college course in English puts on the boy of seventeen an effectual check to any natural ardor he may have for the literature of his mother-tongue. It is rash to quote from memory, yet I believe it was a year ago before a Connecticut educational convention that President Hadley said he should prefer to have young men come to Yale wholly ignorant of English literature rather than have them come, as many were coming, with a decided prejudice against it. Such a prejudice many others have remarked. And we have no farther to go to find its cause than the books which are used for the study of English in our classical high schools.

The entire matter, after all, rests upon this: what is the aim of



teaching English literature? If our aim is to exercise the pupil's mind and prepare it for other things than reading; if our ideal is to develop quick and accurate thinking in the affairs of life; if we mean to class English literature with Latin, geometry, algebra, and the modern languages, as a subject "to train the mind;" if English is to be a purely intellectual process and mental drill—then we have chosen an admirable set of tools with which to work. Throw aside *The Merchant of Venice*, *Ivanhoe*, and *Silas Marner*, add three works of the type of Macaulay's *Addison*, and we shall have ourselves well equipped to join the ranks of the teachers of Latin and algebra, and march with them toward the same goal.

If, on the other hand, our aim is to cultivate a liking for the best that has ever been written; if we are going to try to form tastes and not train intellects; if our ideal is to lead boys and girls out of darkness into "the sweetness and light" of real literature—then we have chosen blindly and unreasonably. Somebody has blundered. The tastes we now form are just the antitheses of our ideals; and the teaching of English literature becomes a complete failure.

Nevertheless, unsuitable as these books are which we make our pupils study, the gulf between them and voluntary reading might be more often spanned if teachers were a little more sympathetic and liberal with regard to their pupils' tastes. From the positions which they hold, and from the nature of the work they are doing, English teachers are men and women who do enjoy and read literature. Compared with people at large, they are literary personages. As a result they do not know what the voluntary reading of their pupils is. They may collect data and know the names of books they read, but further than that they plead ignorance. How many teachers today could pass an examination on the works of Henty, Alger, Ellis, Castleman, Winfield, or Oliver Optic? How many could relate *Comus* or *Silas Marner*, or *The Vision of Sir Launfal* to the voluntary reading of a girl, who is going to college in two years, and who writes that the two books she enjoyed most in the summer vacation were *The Havoc of a Smile*, by L. B. Walford, and *Poor and Proud; or The Fortunes of Katy Redburn*? Teachers, to be sure, have put away childish things; they have cultivated literary tastes; they are scholarly. Yet I fail to see how they can make any

use of that voluntary reading, no matter what their other tastes are, until they have at least a speaking acquaintance with it; or how they can interest their pupils in what *they* like, until they show them that their teachers are also interested in what *they* like and naturally enjoy.

A teacher of science or mathematics being, as a rule, not a man of literary tastes, often, if not generally, has more reading sympathies with his pupils than does their teacher of English; and, in my mind, there is no doubt that the former, with a little experience, would surpass the latter as a teacher of literature.

Two other mistakes we English teachers are constantly making. From the nature of our work, we become too much prejudiced against the books our boys and girls are reading. The great majority of them are harmless, often even stimulating, stuffed with moral, generally productive of admirable men and women. They are not positively bad. None of them are utterly worthless. They are only the natural food for boys and girls between the ages of thirteen and twenty. And they agree with them remarkably well. Yet I have heard teachers speak of them before their classes as "trash."

Again, we sometimes forget that literature, in reality, is a thing for the few. People, in general, have never had, and never will have, any artistic sense when it comes to style, or that subtle quality which all literature possesses. Not one business man in a hundred today reads Macaulay or Addison—or even Irving. Shakespeare, Scott, Tennyson, and Dickens, in leather bindings, are in many parlors where the daily pabulum is the newspapers, magazines, and recent novels. More rare than an ability to appreciate classical music or the masters of painting is the ability to enjoy intensely pure literature. It is a gift, inborn—rarely an acquired taste. Yet I have known teachers who thought that unless boys and girls liked Milton, and that unless men and women read poetry, they were lost.

The prejudices of English teachers, the simple and crude quality of pupils' reading, above all the literature studied in class—these are the conditions which practically forbid any serious correlation of voluntary reading and classical high-school English. However, we are unwilling to give up; and many of us are striving, with one experiment and another, in spite of the obstacles in our way, to bring such

a relation about. In my own efforts I have worked with two objects in mind; to attack the prescribed classics as though they were one and the same thing as voluntary reading; and to become familiar with the books which my pupils themselves read and enjoy.

In the first place, therefore, as for Macaulay's Essays, or *Macbeth*, or any of the others, we do not study them. We simply read, not by any means every page, not in all parts thoroughly, seldom twice, never as literature *per se*, but as something naturally, as a matter of course, to be enjoyed, as a boy enjoys *Treasure Island*, *Tom Sawyer*, or *Oliver Twist*. Notes, introductions, lists of dates, suggestions for methods of study, sample questions, all the editing of a modern school classic I never ask a normal, sane pupil to read. Summaries, plans, outlines, compulsory memory passages, for the most part, at once put a book into that hateful class of books which a boy calls "dry." Therefore I cannot afford to use them, no matter what the college requirements may be. Every day I repeat to myself the best advice that was ever given me: "Literature is of the spirit and cannot be taught; don't teach, don't preach, don't fall into the routine of grinding. Read, read—inspire interest and hope for the best."

The instant that I see a class making work out of a play of Shakespeare's or *Silas Marner* I know that I have blundered and begin another book. In this way we regularly spend no more than six recitations with *The Ancient Mariner*, ten or twelve with *Julius Caesar*, eight with *The Life of Goldsmith*, never more than ten with *Ivanhoe*, and so on.

The final result of this method I am not prepared to foretell. Certainly of technical, college examination knowledge the boys would have hardly enough to win honors in Cambridge. But what is much more important, a large number of them seem to look back with real pleasure to what was, although they did not always know it at the time, their study of English literature. And what is more essential still, many of them are so far from that prejudice against literature of which President Hadley has spoken, that I can cherish the hope that some of them will later, of their own accord, read more of the same kind. And this hope is infinitely more comforting than an A at Harvard or a B at Yale.

In the second place, I admit frankly to myself that my year of

pedagogical study was time wasted. I realize now that the ideal training for a teacher of English is to spend some time as custodian of the children's department of a large public library. This I have had to discover myself. Now it is too late. And consequently I have had to invent other means by which to keep in touch with what the boys and girls of my classes are reading, that I may talk intelligently when they are eager and able to talk, that I may show interest, just as I want them to show interest. And, after all, how can I expect the one without giving the other? To help me, therefore, I have each pupil keep a book record—a blank book in which he enters all books which he reads out of school by himself or in connection with his English work; the title, author, form, number of pages, and a paragraph of remarks. These book records we use constantly. I collect them, make suggestions, arrange lists of books highly praised to put on the blackboard, and, as far as possible, read them myself. Then pupils write compositions about them, exchange records to read each other's entries, and, above all, draw comparisons wherever possible, between them and the literature we are reading for college. Hardly a period passes without some minutes given to these memoranda; and of all the week these minutes are most heartily enjoyed by pupils and teacher. Certainly, in my mind, there are none more instructive.

All this naturally takes a vast amount of time. My own tastes I often cannot indulge. At times a skim-milk story of Castleman's will be almost nauseating. Today my three volumes of Lamb's *Letters* are standing with leaves uncut. But as the years go on my task will grow easier; and meanwhile I am accumulating a mass of general information, and insight into books that children read, which it seems to me is indispensable if I wish to lead them up to Macaulay and Scott, Tennyson and Shakespeare.

What, now, is the result of these two methods, or rather what ought the result to be when they are thoroughly tried and perfected? For as yet they are in but a rudimentary stage. First of all, the English class ought to be "recreation," not the drill and proverbial training of Latin and Algebra and the rest. It ought to be a place where feelings and tastes can develop, not one more period for intellectual mechanics. It ought to be an hour largely of reading, or discussion

guided by the teacher, of reading which will be both the literature prescribed for college, and the voluntary reading of each pupil, so blended together that the boy hardly sees at the time which is which. Then that dark gulf between the two ought, in a great measure, to cease to exist; and, before you know it, your pupils should be coming to a real liking of the best authors in our language. The bridging of that gulf, however, is a most delicate matter. The boy must be led across it, not driven. Enticing and even coaxing must enter into the process. Compulsory reading of Macaulay we have; but compulsory enjoyment of Macaulay is impossible. A teacher can make no greater blunder than scorning or looking down upon the books that his pupils naturally enjoy. If he does, the gulf between them and literature is certainly widened; for, as someone has said, "half of teaching is sympathy." I should sooner say to a boy that because he did not enjoy *Macbeth* he was certainly damned, than tell him that *Joe, the Indian Killer*, of which he was passionately fond, was "trash."

And yet, with all tact, and in spite of every effort, a gulf will remain. The present conditions, as I said at the beginning, will not allow to any appreciable extent the correlation of which we are speaking. The nature of the classical high-school English is too great an obstacle to be overcome by any device from without. Before we hope for entire success we must remove other "plagues" from our "city of dreadful night."